

news in brief

Army worms on the march: Reports from a number of sources indicate that army worms, second only to locusts as a threat to agriculture over much of Africa, are occurring in very large numbers this year in West and East Africa and in the southern Arabian peninsula. Army worms (pictured right), larvae of the Lepidoptera genus *Spodoptera*, attack food, especially cereals, fodder as well as cash crops such as cotton. But in East Africa the most serious damage may be to grazing. In earlier outbreaks, the pest have tended to move northwards in a series of waves and may cause a cattle famine anywhere from Transvaal to southern Ethiopia.

The current situation adds urgency to research on the possibility of using the *S. exempta* virus as a pesticide. This research was held up last year because no one could locate any army worm outbreaks. Use of *S. Exempta* is the second stage of the virus-and-pheromone concept, the first stage of which, directed against the Mediterranean army worm, (*Nature*, 7 December 1978) has now reached the stage of extended field trials on 5,000 acres in the Egyptian Fayoum — from Peter Collins in Geneva.

Soviet call for co-operation on global problems: Academician Dzherman Gvishiani, deputy head of the Soviet Union's State Committee for Science and Technology, has called for a "concerted approach" to the solution in Europe, and ultimately the world, of such major problems as environment, population, water resources, health care, and desertification. Writing in *Pravda*, Gvishiani stressed that such problems can no longer be solved by the efforts of one country alone. In this he differs markedly from Academician Anatolii Aleksandrov, chairman of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, who averred last April that "there is no scientific-technical problem that would not be within our power." Gvishiani, urges the setting up of all-European or inter-state forums to help turn the Helsinki accords into specific action for environmental protection, the development of transport, and energy.

Fire at Windscale causes radiation exposure: Eight workers suffered radiation exposure when a fire broke out on 17 July at a decanning cave at British Nuclear Fuel's Windscale reprocessing plant. The most serious case was 0.3 rem exposure, the equivalent of 10 chest X-rays. This is below the unit of 3 rem in any 13 weeks set for radiation workers by the International Committee for Radiation Protection. The fire occurred when a piece of irradiated fuel rod became jammed in a fuel assembly. Dismounting machinery failed to remove the jammed rod and the fire started, presumably due to friction between the assembly cover and the uranium rods. The fire was extinguished after 45 minutes by flooding the area with water manually through access hole in the top of the cave. Numerous questions remain to be answered about the incident, including the reason for the escape of material and the failure of safety provisions to prevent the event. Community representatives on a BNFL community liaison committee have called for a full investigation "on behalf of the local people and not as a public relations exercise for BNFL".

Czech scientists await trial: Five scientists — mathematician Vaclav Benda, psychologists Jiri Nemeč and Dana Nemcova, and (engineers) Ladislav Lis and Petr Uhl — are among ten Czech human rights activists now awaiting trial for "subversion on a large scale". In plain terms, their offence is their membership of VONS, the "Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted", a subgroup of the Charter 77 movement. Since its

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inauguration, the committee has issued 113 statements on alleged breaches of justice and legality. The ten detainees were arrested on 29 May, and their trial is expected in the next few days. If convicted, they face prison sentences of up to 10 years.

No future for nuclear power plants in Iran: "Only a miracle can rescue both nuclear power stations" an official of the West German engineering company Kraftwerkunion GmbH said last week. He told *Nature* that work permits for the last 50 members of Kraftwerkunion staff will expire by the end of this month. Earlier in the year, there were still hopes that the 6.9bn works would be finished by 1981 the contract was 80% completed. But influential officials are taking a strong line against any nuclear power stations in Iran, and Kraftwerkunion now sees little hope of a resumption of work. The prospect of the plant's cooling towers ending up as grain silos now appears far more likely than before. — Klaus Höpfner.

ILL ready for its "deuxième souffle": The renewal programme for one of the world's leading neutron research facilities, the Institut Laue-Langevin in Grenoble, is close to final approval. Funds for ILL's "deuxième souffle" — amounting to 104 million French francs to update instruments and techniques — were approved by the member countries, Britain, France and Germany on 25 May. But because of prior French budget commitments, the detailed spending for the five year programme has been postponed by the French until October. ILL Director John White calls the 25 May approval "extremely good news" and is optimistic that the French difficulty will be resolved.

Jupiter space shot survives budget threat: Project Galileo — NASA's plan to send a joint probe and orbiter mission to Jupiter in 1982 — has survived a threat from a key Congressional subcommittee, some members of which had been threatening to cut off funds to help pay for overspending on the space shuttle. The threat to kill the project came primarily from Senator William Proxmire, chairman of the Senate appropriations Subcommittee responsible for the budgets of both NASA and the National Science Foundation. Senator Proxmire, no great friend of the basic science community, had also suggested that about \$20 million be taken out of the budget of the proposed space telescope. However, at a meeting last week the subcommittee refused to go along with either of these proposals, and agreed to recommend to the full appropriations committee that NASA be granted the full \$3,822 million in the President's budget request for the fiscal year 1980. Within this total, however, the subcommittee recommended that budget cuts totalling \$17 million be allocated to five new projects, including preliminary design studies for a national oceanographic satellite system (a proposed successor to SEASAT), and a multispectral resource satellite.

Islamic technical training centre opens in Bangladesh: An Islamic Centre for Technical and Vocational Training and Research (ICTVTR) began work at Dacca last month, with a board of directors including representatives of Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Indonesia, Senegal, Gambia, and Bangladesh. The Centre will be built on a 30 acre site provided by the government of Bangladesh at Tongi, 10 miles north of the capital. It will cost \$9.6m and is expected to be completed by April 1983. Saudi Arabia has already announced a grant of \$2m for the centre. ICTVTR has drawn up a programme for a ten month interim training course in machine shop technology for 50 instructors; and to meet the technical manpower needs of Islamic countries it will undertake training programmes in chemical and mechanical technology, design and drafting, computer programming and technical innovations in oil and gas. — from M. Kabir in Dacca.